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ABSTRACT

The role played by the state government in Victoria, Australia, in public education changed considerably when the Labour Party took office in the early 1980s. Seeking to redress social imbalances and inequities, the government sought broad decentralization of decision making in education, with an increased role for teachers, parents, and students. Six policy documents were developed by the Ministry of Education covering decision making, planning for school improvement, the status and roles of the newly reorganized state and regional boards of education and the local school councils, and curriculum development and planning. This paper reviews these developments to provide a context for a symposium on curricular development and planning in Victoria. (PGD)

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EDUCATION IN VICTORIA - THE CONTEXT

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EDUCATION IN VICTORIA - THE CONTEXT

> "For more than a decade Victorian schools have been assuming increasing responsibility for their own curricula. Devolution of this responsibility to schools has already led to much thoughtful and imaginative innovation and has brought curriculum issues to the forefront of public discussion. The Government intends that the devolution of curriculum development be extended and set within clear guidelines for planning at the school level."
>
> Ministerial Paper No. 6: Curriculum Development and Planning in Victoria

In Australia, during the early 1980's the Labour Party gained government at both Federal and Victorian State levels. These governments support progressive social policies aimed at redressing social imbalances and inequities in society. In education, programs such as the Disadvantaged Schools Program and the Participation and Equity Program were developed at the Federal level, while at the State level, a number of Ministerial Reviews and Papers were initiated. All of these initiatives focussed attention on such issues as access and success for all, democratic decision making and shared responsibility in a rapidly changing social context including rapid technological advances and high youth unemployment.

While under the Australian Constitution education is the responsibility of the States, the Government provides the funding through return of federally collected Income Tax revenue and through special grants and programs.

The series of Ministerial Papers were developed to clarify the Victorian State Government's expectations for schools.

Ministerial Paper No. 1: Decision making in Victorian Education (1983)
No. 2: The School Improvement Plan (1982)
No. 3: The State Board of Education (1983)
No. 4: School Councils (1983)
No. 5: Regional Boards of Education (1984)
No. 6: Curriculum Development and Planning in Victoria (1984)

These policy documents reflected the shift in emphasis towards wider participation by the community in educational decision making and the resulting empowerment of both parents and students in this process. Changes to the membership and functions of School Councils made them more representative of the major interest groups (teachers, parents and students) and increased their powers.

> "Schools are ... seen to be the focal point in the educative process and it is expected that they will determine their own curricula, within the principles and framework of Government policy."
>
> Ministerial Paper No. 3: Decision Making in Victorian Education

In terms of curricula in schools, Ministerial Paper No. 6: Curriculum Development and Planning in Victoria provides the broad framework and elaborates the Government's general educational philosophy.

The complementary roles of schools and the Government in the development of curriculum are described as follows:

> "Schools are charged with the responsibility of providing all young people with experiences that cannot be readily or universally gained through other life experiences and that are necessary for them to become effective adults.
>
> "In discharging this responsibility the schools central commitment must be to provide a broad general education for all.
>
> "... the Government must ensure that schools do not devise programs that promote narrow, sectional interests or that exclude important aspects of learning. More positively, schools can expect to be provided with a coherent framework which will assist them in making decisions about their curricula. This is the purpose of this document."

This trend to devolution of responsibility for education also involved the formation of regions within the (then) Education Department. In broad terms the Regional Boards of Education were established to provide a link between schools and the central office in Melbourne. These regional boards are

> "a key element in the process through which the needs of schools, as a group, are identified and examined, priorities determined for the nature and extent of services and resources needed in the region, and guidelines defined for the deployment and management of these resources and services."
>
> Ministerial Paper No. 5: Regional Boards of Education

The regions are also expected to manage such aspects as the maintenance and building programs of schools, and to act as a source of advice to the Ministry of Education in relation to long term plans for education in the region.

This symposium enlarges on the strategies and processes adopted by various levels of the system to implement the policy guidelines contained in Ministerial Paper No. 6.

The processes of development and implementation embraced by the Ministry of Education have been supplemented by contributions from both individuals and groups within the tertiary institutions of Victoria.

One of these, Victoria College, has played a significant role through individual academics being members of writing teams and development committees, and through contract work. Victoria College is the State's largest provider of teachers and its involvement in the present curriculum developments reflects not only its longstanding interest in the field but also its considerable pool of available expertise.

The general structure of the symposium can be shown as follows: